

Chomsky: Let's Focus On Preventing Nuclear War, Rather Than Debating "Just War"



Noam Chomsky

NATO leaders announced Wednesday that the alliance plans to reinforce its eastern front by deploying many more troops in countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia — including [thousands of U.S. troops](#) — and sending [“equipment to help Ukraine defend itself against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats.”](#) And while the NATO alliance itself is not directly providing weapons to Ukraine, many of its member countries are [pouring weapons into Ukraine](#), including missiles, rockets, machine guns, and more.

In all likelihood, Russian President Vladimir Putin believed that his military would overrun Ukraine within a matter of a few days on February 24, when he ordered an invasion into the neighboring country after a long and massive military buildup on Ukraine’s border.

A month later, however, the war is still raging, and several Ukrainian cities have been devastated by Russian air attacks. Peace talks have stalled, and it is unclear whether Putin still wants to overthrow the government or is instead aiming now for a “neutral” Ukraine.

In the interview that follows, world-renowned scholar and leading dissident voice Noam Chomsky shares his thoughts and insights about the available options for an end to the war in Ukraine, and ponders the idea of “just” war and whether the war in Ukraine could potentially lead to the collapse of Putin’s regime.

Chomsky is internationally recognized as one of the most important intellectuals alive. His intellectual stature has been compared to that of Galileo, Newton and Descartes, as his work has had tremendous influence on a variety of areas of scholarly and scientific inquiry, including linguistics, logic and mathematics, computer science, psychology, media studies, philosophy, politics and international affairs. He is the author of some 150 books and the recipient of scores of highly prestigious awards, including the Sydney Peace Prize and the Kyoto Prize (Japan's equivalent of the Nobel Prize), and of dozens of honorary doctorate degrees from the world's most renowned universities. Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and currently Laureate Professor at the University of Arizona.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, we are already a month into the war in Ukraine and peace talks have stalled. In fact, Putin is turning up the volume on violence as the West increases military aid to Ukraine. In a [previous interview](#), you compared Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the Nazi invasion of Poland. Is Putin's strategy then straight out of Hitler's playbook? Does he want to occupy all of Ukraine? Is he trying to rebuild the Russian empire? Is this why peace negotiations have stalled?

Noam Chomsky: There is very little credible information about the negotiations. Some of the information leaking out sounds mildly optimistic. There is good reason to suppose that if the U.S. were to agree to participate seriously, with a constructive program, the possibilities for an end to the horror would be enhanced.

What a constructive program would be, at least in general outline, is no secret. The primary element is commitment to neutrality for Ukraine: no membership in a hostile military alliance, no hosting of weapons aimed at Russia (even those misleadingly called "defensive"), no military maneuvers with hostile military forces.

That would hardly be something new in world affairs, even where nothing formal exists. Everyone understands that Mexico cannot join a Chinese-run military alliance, emplace Chinese weapons aimed at the U.S. and carry out military maneuvers with the People's Liberation Army.

In brief, a constructive program would be about the opposite of the [Joint](#)

[Statement on the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership](#) signed by the White House on September 1, 2021. This document, which received little notice, forcefully declared that the door for Ukraine to join NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) is wide open. It also “finalized a Strategic Defense Framework that creates a foundation for the enhancement of U.S.-Ukraine strategic defense and security cooperation” by providing Ukraine with advanced anti-tank and other weapons along with a “robust training and exercise program in keeping with Ukraine’s status as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner.”

The statement was another purposeful exercise in poking the bear in the eye. It is another contribution to a process that NATO (meaning Washington) has been perfecting since Bill Clinton’s 1998 violation of George H.W. Bush’s firm pledge not to expand NATO to the East, a decision that elicited strong warnings from high-level diplomats from George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Jack Matlock, (current CIA Director) William Burns, and many others, and led Defense Secretary William Perry to come close to resigning in protest, joined by a long list of others with eyes open. That’s of course in addition to the aggressive actions that struck directly at Russia’s concerns (Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and lesser crimes), conducted in such a way as to maximize the humiliation.

It doesn’t strain credulity to suspect that that the joint statement was a factor in inducing Putin and the narrowing circle of “hard men” around him to decide to step up their annual mobilization of forces on the Ukrainian border in an effort to gain some attention to their security concerns, in this case on to direct criminal aggression — which, indeed, we can compare with the Nazi invasion of Poland (in combination with Stalin).

Neutralization of Ukraine is the main element of a constructive program, but there is more. There should be moves towards some kind of federal arrangement for Ukraine involving a degree of autonomy for the Donbass region, along the general lines of what remains of Minsk II. Again, that would be nothing new in world affairs. No two cases are identical, and no real example is anywhere near perfect, but [federal structures exist in Switzerland and Belgium](#), among other cases — even the U.S. to an extent. Serious diplomatic efforts might find a solution to this problem, or at least contain the flames.

And the flames are real. Estimates are that some 15,000 people have been killed

in conflict in this region since 2014.

That leaves Crimea. On Crimea, the West has two choices. One is to recognize that the Russian annexation is simply a fact of life for now, irreversible without actions that would destroy Ukraine and possibly far more. The other is to disregard the highly likely consequences and to strike heroic gestures about how the U.S. “will never recognize Russia’s purported annexation of Crimea,” as the joint statement proclaims, accompanied by many eloquent pronouncements by others who are willing to consign Ukraine to utter catastrophe while advertising their bravery.

Like it or not, those are the choices.

Does Putin want to “occupy all of Ukraine and rebuild the Russian empire?” His announced goals (mainly neutralization) are quite different, including his statement that it would be madness to try to reconstruct the old Soviet Union, but he might have had something like this in mind. If so, it’s hard to imagine what he and his circle still do. For Russia to occupy Ukraine would make its experience in Afghanistan look like a picnic in the park. By now that’s abundantly clear.

Putin does have the military capacity — and judging by Chechnya and other escapades, the moral capacity — to leave Ukraine in smoldering ruins. That would mean no occupation, no Russian empire and no more Putin.

Our eyes are rightly focused on the mounting horrors of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. It would be a mistake, however, to forget that the joint statement is only one of the pleasures that the imperial mind is quietly conjuring up.

A few weeks ago, [we discussed](#) President Biden’s National Defense Authorization Act, as little known as the joint statement. This brilliant document — again quoting Michael Klare — calls for “an unbroken chain of U.S.-armed sentinel states — stretching from Japan and South Korea in the northern Pacific to Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore in the south and India on China’s eastern flank” — meant to encircle China, including Taiwan, “ominously enough.”

We might ask how China feels about the fact that the U.S. Indo-Pacific command is now reported to be planning to enhance the encirclement, doubling its spending in fiscal year 2022, in part [to develop](#) “a network of precision-strike

missiles along the so-called first island chain.”

For defense, of course, so the Chinese [government has] no reason for concern.

There is little doubt that Putin’s aggression against Ukraine fails [just war theory](#), and that NATO is also morally responsible for the crisis. But what about Ukraine arming civilians to fight against the invaders? Isn’t this morally justified on the same grounds that resistance against the Nazis was morally justified?

Just war theory, regrettably, has about as much relevance to the real world as “humanitarian intervention,” “responsibility to protect” or “defending democracy.”

On the surface, it seems a virtual truism that a people in arms have the right to defend themselves against a brutal aggressor. But as always in this sad world, questions arise when we think about it a little.

Take the resistance against the Nazis. There could hardly have been a more noble cause.

One can certainly understand and sympathize with the motives of Herschel Grynszpan when he assassinated a German diplomat in 1938; or the British-trained partisans who assassinated the Nazi murderer Reinhard Heydrich in May 1942. And one can admire their courage and passion for justice, without qualification.

That’s not the end, however. The first provided the Nazis with the pretext for the atrocities of Kristallnacht and impelled the Nazi program further toward its hideous outcomes. The second led to the shocking Lidice massacres.

Events have consequences. The innocent suffer, perhaps terribly. Such questions cannot be avoided by people with a moral bone in their bodies. The questions cannot fail to arise when we consider whether and how to arm those courageously resisting murderous aggression.

That’s the least of it. In the present case, we also have to ask what risks we are willing to take of a nuclear war, which will not only spell the end of Ukraine but far beyond, to the truly unthinkable.

It is not encouraging that [over a third of Americans](#) favor “taking military action

[in Ukraine] even if it risks a nuclear conflict with Russia,” perhaps inspired by commentators and political leaders who should think twice before doing their Winston Churchill impersonations.

Perhaps ways can be found to provide needed arms to the defenders of Ukraine to repel the aggressors while avoiding dire consequences. But we should not delude ourselves into believing that it is a simple matter, to be settled by bold pronouncements.

Do you anticipate dramatic political developments inside Russia if the war lasts much longer or if Ukrainians resist even after formal battles have ended? After all, Russia’s economy is already under siege and could end up with an economic collapse unparalleled in recent history.

I don’t know enough about Russia even to hazard a guess. One person who does know enough at least to “speculate” — and only that, as he reminds us — is Anatol Lieven, whose insights have been a very useful guide all along. He regards “dramatic political developments” as highly unlikely because of the nature of the harsh kleptocracy that Putin has carefully constructed. Among the more optimistic guesses, “the most likely scenario,” [Lieven writes](#), “is a sort of semi-coup, most of which will never become apparent in public, by which Putin and his immediate associates will step down ‘voluntarily’ in return for guarantees of their personal immunity from arrest and their family’s wealth. Who would succeed as president in these circumstances is a totally open question.”

And not necessarily a pleasant question to consider.

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